



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

SRI LANKA

TSUNAMI RESPONSE

Drama Helps Children Cope with Trauma

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In better spirits after an evening of singing and dancing, these children in Seenigama, in southern Sri Lanka, look forward to returning to school next week.

MORE INFORMATION ON USAID'S RESPONSE TO THE TSUNAMI

For more information on USAID's assistance to the communities affected by the tsunami, visit www.usaid.gov.

BELOVED SRI LANKAN ACTOR HELPS CHILDREN TRAUMATIZED BY TSUNAMI

"Who loves the sea?" asks a man with a familiar face, as he beats his tambourine. "We all love the sea," chant the children around him laughing and waving their arms. Vasante Morogoda, a well-known Sri Lankan actor, invites the children to sing old songs with new words and to imitate animals. Spontaneous energy moves the children to act and play games. But sadness hides behind their smiles.

"Does the sea love us?" inquires a small boy suddenly, looking for an explanation for the tragedy that hit his village only a few weeks earlier.

The question touches each of the 98 children and youth gathered in the make-shift camp at the Seenigama temple in Galle, southern Sri Lanka. All of them lost their homes to the tsunami and most of them were left with only a fraction of their family members. Some have lost everything. Vasante Morogoda cannot explain their loss, but he has come to help raise morale and build self-confidence of these traumatized children.

In the village of Seenigama, massive waves destroyed the houses of more than 300 families leaving behind nothing but rubble – and desperation. The need for psychological support, particularly of children and mothers, is acute. To respond to the tsunami-related psychological damage, the psycho-social drama project was initiated by USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) in Sri Lanka, together with a Multi Diverse Community, a non-governmental organization founded by Vasante Morogoda.

GAMES AND SONGS TEACH CHILDREN HOW TO COPE WITH LIFE IN CAMPS AND FOCUS ON FUTURE

Assisted by OTI and his group of 50 people, Morogoda is using theatre techniques to help the children and teenagers overcome their fears. The group also offers counseling to adults. Through ingenious games and songs, the children gain skills to cope with everyday difficulties in the camp where hundreds of people share the temple floor, seven tents and two toilets.

"Can we rebuild everything?" "Yes."

"Who is going to clean the environment and pick up the garbage?" "We will."

"We are going to pull out of the disaster and rebuild!" answer the children to Morogoda's questions that both challenge and motivate.

As the children sing "We have no differences. We are all the sons and daughters of this soil," they affirm that only through unity can the damaged communities and lives be repaired. The message of coexistence and cooperation is a central theme in this USAID supported project – a message that applies to the entire Sri Lankan society which is still recovering from a long political conflict.



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"Who loves the sea?" asks Vasante Morogoda, a well-known Sri Lankan actor. "We all love the sea!" sing the children. Morogoda has come as part of a USAID drama project to raise the morale and rebuild the self-confidence of the children traumatized by the tsunami.

Every evening, the children play games and act roles that require forming groups and doing tasks. Theatre prepares them for the personal and communal effort that lies ahead. Besides, it is fun. This might be the only time of the day when laughter can be heard in the Seenigama camp.

As Vasante Morogoda will move to other affected coastal communities to bring support, a part of his group will continue in Seenigama. The effects of the program have been encouraging, according to Mr. Zafarullah Has-sim from OTI. "Already a few days after starting the project, the children were cleaning their camps, keeping up their own hygiene, and - surprisingly - teaching the adults to do the same. "

Theatre groups like Mr. Morogoda's are only one of the ways that USAID is supporting to meet the psychological needs of children affected by the tsunami. USAID also works with international and local organizations to provide individual, family, and community counseling, as well as technical support and guidance to ensure that those services reach all in need and meet high international standards.

PUBLIC DONATION INFORMATION

The best way to help is to make cash contributions to humanitarian organizations working to assist the affected countries.

For a list of organizations accepting donations, please see "Tsunami Relief" at www.usaid.gov or call the Center for International Disaster Information at (703) 276-1914.